

Message Text

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SUBJ: GOE CONCERN ABOUT AMERICAN OFFICIAL AND PRESS
PROMINENCE BEING GIVEN TO ASAD AND SYRIA

REF CAIRO 1761

1. SUMMARY: CONCUR IN DESIRABILITY OF REASSURING
EGYPTIAN LEADERSHIP, BUT OUR PUBLIC STATEMENTS OF
APPRECIATION FOR SADAT'S CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE IN ME
COULD WELL BRING ON RENEWED TORRENT OF ABUSE FROM
DAMASCUS. THERE IS NOT MUCH WE CAN DO ABOUT
AMERICAN JOURNALISTS PAYING MORE ATTENTION TO
SYRIA. IT'S NEWS. BUT WE SHOULD AVOID TEMPTATION
TO RESPOND TO SYRIAN MEDIA ATTACKS ON US. END SUMMARY.

2. FOR REASONS CAIRO REFTEL MAKES CLEAR, SYRIA
HAS NOT AND IS NOT ABOUT TO DISPLACE EGYPT IN
USG EYES AS PRINCIPAL ARAB WORLD LEADER, WHETHER
MEASURED BY THE VALUE OF OUR AID PROGRAM OR THE
RESPECT WITH WHICH OFFICIAL AND PRIVATE AMERICANS
REGARD SADAT. WE ALSO CONCUR THAT IT IS DESIRABLE TO
REASSURE EGYPTIAN LEADERSHIP BUT SUSPECT THAT PUBLIC
STATEMENTS OF OUR APPRECIATION FOR SADAT'S CONSTRUCTIVE
ROLE IN ME PEACE PROCESS MAY HAVE AT LEAST AS MANY
DRAWBACKS AS BENEFITS, GIVEN NATURE OF SYRO-EGYPTIAN

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QUARREL.

3. THE ATTACKS SYRIA MOUNTED AGAINST EGYPT BEGINNING LAST SEPTEMBER, WERE A VIVID REMINDER OF HOW SYRIANS CAN WORK AGAINST THEIR OWN DECLARED INTEREST, IN THIS CASE OF ARAB UNITY AND AN HONORABLE POLITICAL SOLUTION. WE BELIEVE THAT CAMPAIGN INCREASED CAIRO'S ALIENATION FROM ITS ARAB WORLD COMMITMENTS AND SERIOUSLY COMPLICATED THE PEACE PROGRESS. IF ASHRAF MARWAN, AS SYRIANS CLAIM, LIED TO THEM LAST SUMMER ABOUT THE CONTENTS OF THE ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN NEGOTIATIONS AND OTHER EGYPTIAN EMISSARIES DELIBERATELY GLOSSED OVER THE SENSITIVE ITEMS, THE SYRIANS NEVER-THELESS OVER-REACTED. WHILE ELEMENTS OF THE PLO LEADERSHIP REPORTEDLY WERE READY BY YEAR'S END TO TURN THE PAGE AND ADAPT TO SINAI II, DAMASCUS HAS REMAINED PUBLICLY AND PRIVATELY BITTER ABOUT THE EGYPTIAN "BETRAYAL."

4. SYRIAN ATTACKS ON SINAI II HAVE BECOME LESS FREQUENT IN THE PAST TWO MONTHS BUT HAVE BY NO MEANS DIED OUT AS AMMAN 693 SUGGESTED. WHAT MOST SURPRISED US IN CAIRO REFTEL WAS THAT SYRIAN MEDIA APPEARS TO HAVE AN AUDIENCE IN CAIRO. WE WONDER WHETHER THIS IS RESTRICTED TO CAIRO FOREIGN MINISTRY READERS OF REPORTS FROM EGYPTIAN OFFICE HERE OR IF SANA ITEMS ARE CARRIED IN EGYPTIAN PRESS OR IF SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT OF EGYPTIAN PUBLIC REGULARLY MONITORS DAMASCUS RADIO. (WE ASSUME DAMASCUS TELEVISION IS NOT RECEIVED IN EGYPT AND THAT EVERYONE OUTSIDE SYRIA HAS BETTER USES FOR HIS MONEY THAN TO SUBSCRIBE TO SYRIAN NEWSPAPERS.)

5. IN ANY EVENT, WE THINK IT WISE THAT USG CONTINUE TO AVOID PUBLICLY REACTING TO THE CRUDE INANITIES OF DAMASCUS RADIO TYPIFIED BY EXAMPLES IN REFTEL PARA 1B. OUR SILENCE NO MORE MEANS ASSENT TO THE ARABS THAN THE DEPARTMENT SPOKESMAN'S "NO COMMENT" MEANS CONFIRMATION. THE SYRIANS WOULD INTERPRET OUR COUNTERATTACK AS MEANING THEIR ACCUSATIONS HAD STRUCK HOME. IN ANY EVENT, AS CAIRO 1619 OBSERVES, DAMASCUS MEDIA ATTACKS ARE "PROBABLY COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE" WITHIN EGYPT.

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6. WHENEVER WASHINGTON HAS GIVEN PUBLIC EXPRESSION TO OUR APPRECIATION OF EGYPT AND SADAT'S LEADERSHIP IN THE PEACE PROCESS, SUCH STATEMENTS HAVE STIMULATED MORE VITRIOL BY DAMASCUS MEDIA AGAINST SADAT. LOGICALLY, RENEWAL OF SUCH STATEMENTS WOULD BE A SELF-DEFEATING PROCESS CUTTING RATHER DEEPLY, WE ASSUME, INTO EGYPT'S SATISFACTION OVER OUR PUBLIC APPLAUSE.

7. AS FAR AS THE AMERICAN PRESS IS CONCERNED, ASAD, AFTER THE SIGNING OF SINAI II, NATURALLY BECAME THE FOCUS OF INCREASED INTEREST. NOV 30 DEADLINE OF UNDOF MANDATE RENEWAL, UNSC DEBATE IN JANUARY, AND SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANON WERE ALL NORMAL PRESS SITUATIONS. ONCE HERE, OUR JOURNALISTS FIND IN DAMASCUS AN ATMOSPHERE OF MYSTERY WHICH CHALLENGES AND INTRIGUES THEM AND POSSIBLY LEADS THEM ON TO ROMANTICIZE THE POWER AND INFLUENCE OF SYRIA OVER THE ME PEACE PROCESS. FEW OF THEM ARE GRANTED THE INTERVIEWS THEY SEEK WITH ASAD, WHO REMAINS AN ENIGMATIC PERSONALITY WITH LITTLE INTEREST IN, AND FEEL FOR, PUBLIC RELATIONS. (INTERVIEWERS WHO ASK HIM DIRECTLY ABOUT THIS PERSONAL LIFE AND HIS WAY OF RULING SYRIA SEEM TO PUZZLE ASAD. HIS STANDARD RESPONSE IS THAT HIS PERSONALITY IS NOT

IMPORTANT; ALL THAT MATTERS IS THE CLARITY OF HIS POLICY, WHICH HE THEN SUMS UP AS: TO ADVANCE ARAB UNITY, THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE, SYRIA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND MILITARY PREPAREDNESS. HE ALMOST ALWAYS STUDIOUSLY AVOIDS PERSONAL CRITICISM OF OTHER ARAB LEADERS. ONE RECENT US INTERVIEWER DESCRIBED HIM PRIVATELY TO US AS BEING ABOUT AS INFORMATIVE AS AN EAST EUROPEAN DEPUTY PREMIER.)

8. SYRIA'S MEDIA BEHAVES QUITE DIFFERENTLY. IT, OF COURSE, FOLLOWS THE GUIDELINES OF GOVERNMENT POLICY, BUT WE DOUBT WHETHER THE PRESIDENT, AND EVEN THE MINISTER OF INFORMATION, PERSONALLY CLEARS THE DAILY COMMENTARY OF PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION. SYRIAN WRITERS SHARE WITH THEIR FELLOW CITIZENS GENERALLY A DESTRUCTIVE
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TONGUE. SYRIANS LOVE TO GOSSIP ABOUT DOMESTIC POLITICS, TEARING APART THEIR POLITICAL LEADERS. THEY CARRY ON THE SAME WAY ABOUT THEIR OWN FRIENDS AND RELATIVES. THE VICIOUS POLEMIC SYRIA IS WAGING AGAINST CAIRO IS BUT A PROJECTION OF AN UNATTRACTIVE NATIONAL CHARACTERISTIC. THIS IS WHAT SOMETIMES OBSCURES THE VALIDITY OF SOME OF THEIR FOREIGN POLICY STANDS AND LEADS OUTSIDERS TO DISMISS THE SYRIANS AS SIMPLY PLAYING A "SPOILING ROLE."

9. ANOTHER CROSS THE SYRIANS SEEM DOOMED TO CARRY ABOUT WITH THEM IS THEIR CONVICTION THAT DAMASCUS HAS ALWAYS BEEN AND REMAINS, THE LEADING BATTLER FOR ARAB RIGHTS AND FEARLESS SUPPORTER OF THIRD WORLD CAUSES. EGYPTIANS UNDERSTANDABLY FIND IT OFFENSIVE THAT "STRUGGLE" IS THE FAVORITE WORD IN BAATHI VOCABULARY

TO DESCRIBE SYRIA'S DIPLOMACY AND POLITICAL INITIATIVES.
FOR EXAMPLE, KUNEITRA WAS REGAINED BY THE WAR OF ATTRITION
AND SYRIA'S "CEASELESS STRUGGLE;" THE ROLE OF US
DIPLOMACY IN THE FIRST DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT IS NEVER
MENTIONED. WHATEVER POLICY COURSE WE ADOPT IN THE PERIOD
LEADING UP TO THIS MAY'S RENEWAL OF UNDOF, WE SHOULD
EXPECT SYRIA TO ASSERT THAT ONLY THE INTENSITY OF ITS
"STRUGGLE" BROUGHT THE US TO ACT.

10. WE HAVE ASKED OURSELVES WHETHER BY
COURTING THE SYRIANS OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, THE USG
A) MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO DANGEROUSLY INFLATING THE
SYRIAN SENSE OF SELF-IMPORTANCE AND B) WHETHER BY
ASSURING THEM WE WOULD NOT TOLERATE AN UNPROVOKED
ISRAELI ATTACK ON THIS COUNTRY, AND BY ENCOURAGING
THEIR ROLE IN LEBANON, WE MAY HAVE GIVEN THE SYRIANS
THE FEELING THEY WERE FREE TO THROW THEIR WEIGHT
AROUND THE REGION. WE THINK NOT. IN ANALYZING
SYRIA'S ROLE IN LEBANESE PEACE-MAKING, FOR EXAMPLE,
IT APPEARS TO US THAT DAMASCUS CAREFULLY CALIBRATED
THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE TO ACHIEVE ITS POLITICAL
GOAL OF HALTING FURTHER DETERIORATION OF THE LEBANESE
POLITICAL STRUCTURE. AS NOTED IN OUR EARLIER REPORTING,
NO ONE HAS EVER FOUND IT EASY TO WORK WITH SYRIA. THE
FACT ALSO IS THAT SYRIA HAS BEEN AND WILL REMAIN A
KEY COUNTRY IN THE PEACE PROCESS WHICH HAS SHOWN
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SOME ENCOURAGING SIGNS OF CAUTION AND MATURITY IN ITS
FOREIGN POLICY.
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